

Terrorism in asymmetrical conflict: ideological and structural aspects, by Ekatarina Stepanova, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Research Report No. 23, Oxford University Press, 2008, 186 pp., £35, ISBN 978-0-19-953355-8

Among the welter of books on terrorism published since 9/11 it is rare to find one that makes an original and innovative contribution to both a conceptualization of terrorism and to policy measures designed to reduce its impact. That Ekatarina Stepanova's book achieves both is the result of sustained research and a willingness to engage with the strategic perspectives of terrorist movements on their own terms. It is, first and the foremost, a close engagement with terrorist movements as adaptive and versatile non-state opponents of states in asymmetrical conflicts that underpins the book's original approach to a topic in urgent need of such a fresh re-appraisal. Or is the sophistication of her approach a hindrance to the exposition of her thesis in clear and concise prose. On the contrary, this is a relatively short book with no wasted words. In addition, the book is well structured, allowing the reader to reflect on the evidence and the arguments both as it is presented and also in respect to its cumulative impact.

The first chapter introduces the typological and definitional issues that surround terrorism and asymmetrical conflict and the innovative notion of 'ideological and structural prerequisites for terrorism'. Throughout the chapter, Stepanova provides compelling evidence, insightful analysis and coherent argument to posit a case for a new typology of terrorism based on a significant adaptation to the notion of asymmetrical conflict. Before offering her adaptation she summarises the conventional typology of asymmetrical conflict where it describes disparity between parties in an armed conflict, primarily in 'military and economic power, potential and resources' (p. 15). Stepanova argues that this definition is outdated in so far as it is of an excessively militarized nature. With a view to updating it, she suggests the terms 'asymmetrical confrontation' and 'asymmetrical conflict' to serve a better purpose than 'asymmetrical warfare'. By adding notions of 'status asymmetry' and 'two-way asymmetry' to the conventional militarized typology of asymmetrical warfare she facilitates an enhanced understanding of asymmetry as it is actually experienced by state and especially non-state actors involved in conflict.

Demonstrating a welcome grasp of the level of strategic thinking that guides all terrorist movements, she incorporates terrorist ideology into a new account of asymmetrical conflict that is thereby competent to explain the tactical use of terrorism. A key step in her argument involves recognizing that asymmetry has a qualitative, as well as a quantitative dimension. Innovatively, she extends 'conflict in which extreme imbalance of military, economic and technological power' to include 'status inequality; specifically, the inequality between a non- or sub-state actor and a state' (p. 19). This is an important development of the concept of asymmetrical conflict because it facilitates an examination of what she calls the 'ideological disparity' separately and in conjunction with the 'structural disparity' between 'stronger' state and their 'weaker' non-state opponents.

At this point, Stepanova places significance on the fact that asymmetry is a two-way process – a fact that helps to explain why the stronger side cannot always rely on its superior military force, technology and economic potential to 'decisively crush its weaker opponent' (p. 20). Instead, 'alongside its multiple superiorities a conventionally stronger side has its own inherent, organic, generic vulnerabilities that are often inevitable by-products of its main strengths and are not minor, temporary flaws that can be quickly fixed' (p. 20). This leads on to an examination of 'ideological disparity' that encourages recognition that anti-state armed actors have a 'very high power of mobilization and indoctrination' at their disposal (p. 21). In support of this analysis Stepanova quotes Carlos Marighella, a Brazilian theorist and practitioner of 'urban guerrilla' warfare, who argued that the conventionally weaker side's 'arms are inferior to the enemy's' but 'from a moral point of view' the former enjoys 'an undeniable superiority' (p. 21).

From a consideration of ideological disparity, Stepanova turns to consider 'structural disparity' between state and non-state opponents. In the first instance, she stresses the importance that attaches to the radical ideology of an armed non-state actor as a factor in dictating or shaping its organizational format. In subsequent chapters, she illustrates this key point with reference to individual examples. Stepanova also places emphasis on the increased tactical advantages non-state actors are likely to achieve over their state opponents the more they adopt structures that are dissimilar to those used by their opponents.

The first chapter concludes by arguing that in addition to establishing the fundamental root causes of terrorism, it is important to recognise the existence of what Stepanova calls 'specific prerequisites for a non-state actor to resort to terrorism' (p. 24). She is surely right to highlight the fact that such prerequisites are what that make 'terrorism a viable and effective mode of operation in an asymmetrical confrontation' (p. 24). It is equally persuasive to suggest that 'the degree of ideological commitment and indoctrination needed to 'justify' the use or threat of violence against civilians in a confrontation with a more powerful protagonist is significantly higher than for most other forms of violence widely practised by non-state actors' (p. 25). However, while she is able to illustrate these claims, her next claim that the necessarily high level of justification needed for terrorist attacks on civilians can only be provided by an extremist ideology appears to be less well substantiated. Uncharacteristically, Stepanova makes a quantum leap from the reasonable assertion that extremist ideology often serves to bind anti system nonstate actors together in a terrorist enterprise to the claim that only such an ideology has this capacity to sanction terrorism. Many scholars would challenge this claim on the basis of numerous instances where terrorist acts are sanctioned by non-state actors without recourse to ideology of any kind but simply on the basis that they are responding in kind to the indiscriminate killing of civilians by their opponents. Ironically, Stepanova hints at this potential weakness in her argument, when she allows that for a weaker party in asymmetrical conflict 'terrorism is perhaps the most effective way to balance this asymmetry by making enemy civilians suffer as much as those in whose name the terrorist claims to act' (p. 18).

The second chapter deals with 'ideological patterns of terrorism' in respect to what Stepanova categorizes as 'radical nationalism'. In doing so, she usefully charts radical nationalism from anti-colonial movements to the rise of 'ethno-separatism' and distinguishes the 'banality' of ethno-political conflict from the 'non-banality' of terrorism. Nonetheless, close attention is paid to the use of terrorism by non-state actors as a tactic – not as an ideology in and of itself. Rather Stepanova describes its use as a 'specific, hyper-extreme tactic of using or threatening violence' that is justified within different ideological frameworks. The chapter concludes by examining what she calls 'realistic grievances and unrealistic goals'. By way of an example she explains how 'broad international; recognition of the right of the Palestinian people to a sovereign state that is to include some of the territories still occupied by Israel'. Despite this, she notes, 'the continuing resistance to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories that involves the systematic use of terrorist means, has little chance of achieving that goal – as long as Israel enjoys the support of the USA'.

The third chapter also deals with 'ideological patterns of terrorism' but in respect of what Stepanova categorizes as 'religious and quasi-religious extremism'. Here she makes an important distinction between 'totalitarian religious sects (such as the pseudo-Shinto Aum Shinrikyo or the US-based radical Christian movements) and 'religious and quasi-religious groups of all other types' (p. 67). Here again she uses structural analysis to contrast the strict hierarchies of totalitarian messianic sects and cults with the diverse, often more loosely networked, sometimes fragmented, structures that characterize most other groups guided by a religious imperative. In the latter case, Stepanova argues that 'semi-autonomous multiple cells' have the ability to 'constantly adapt themselves to the environment, resurface and interact in various combinations and reorganize themselves' (p. 67).

This is also the chapter where Stepanova introduces what she calls 'the rise of modern violent Islamism' (p. 75). This entails a detailed focus on the influence of Sayyid Qutb and the concept of jihad. She highlights the fact that this quasi-religious ideology 'allows (its proponents) to turn even an actual defeat into a spiritual victory, a triumph in the religious sense'. Qutb is quoted to support this argument: 'When a Muslim embarks upon Jihad and enters the battlefield, he has already won a great encounter of the Jihad' (p. 99). Emphasis is also placed on the concept of 'imaan' (faith) arguing that it has little to do with theology but rather 'the power of faith that glorifies acts of violence, including mass-causality terrorism, for the perpetrators'. It is, she suggests, 'the power of belief that helps to explain why for the violent Islamist extremists, the alternative to victory in jihad is not defeat' but rather tactical retreat or death as a martyr. By suggesting that this capacity distinguishes violent Islamists from 'moderate Muslims' (p. 98) Stepanova reveals a limited understanding of the extent to which al-Qaida propagandists (in particular) regularly base their claims on well founded political grievances that resonate in Muslim communities just as IRA propagandists delivered political messages that were resonated in Irish Catholic communities. Which is not to diminish the importance of Stepanova's new typology but rather to highlight what she acknowledges is the overriding skill of successful nonstate

actors who employ terrorist tactics against more powerful state opponents – to make positive connections with their target audiences.

In chapter four, Stepanova turns her attention to the ‘organizational forms of terrorism at the local and regional levels’ and highlights the deficiencies in the ‘old’ versus ‘new’ accounts of terrorism. In addition, the chapter illustrates her claim that ‘important ideological parallels can be drawn between new-transnational terrorist networks and old localized conflict-related terrorism’ (p. 101) extremely well. Instead, ‘hybrid structures that combine elements and features associated with more than one organizational form’ (p. 101) are shown to apply to ‘militant groups that employ terrorist means at the local or regional level’ who simultaneously display new organizational patterns that cannot be pigeon holed into existing patterns of hierarchies, networks or clans. When considering organizational forms in respect to Hamas, she notes that the ‘quasi-state functions’ assumed by Hamas pose significant political and security challenges. According to Stepanova Hamas was responsible for ‘some of the worst suicide terrorist attacks in the course of the second intifada’ (p. 117) but that the movement then restrained its terrorist activity. Of particular significance, she suggests, is the fact that Hamas have not been directly associated with the transnational violent Islamist movement inspired by al-Qaida’s example’ (p. 117). This observation provides evidence for her key policy recommendation that policy efforts should be aimed towards ‘the politicization and political transformation of violent Islamist movements in a specific national context’ (see below). In chapter five, Stepanova examines the ‘organizational forms of the violent Islamist movement at the transnational level’. In doing so, she seeks to expose the limitations of organizational network theory and social network theory when seeking to describe ‘the post al-Qaida movement’ that is better understood as displaying ‘an amorphous, multi-layered structure and loose ulterior links between different elements’. Her difficult task is to assess how despite such an amorphous structure, the movement ‘manages to act effectively’, ‘function as one organism’ and to ‘neutralize its inherent weaknesses’ (p. 133). From an impressive assembly of evidence, it is worth highlighting a focus on the extent to which the movement’s ‘units, cells, leaders and rank and file’ identify with its ideological goals (p. 142). Most especially, Stepanova is concerned to foreground the importance of ‘a unity of ideology and strategy’ that can only be achieved where ‘the ideology itself serves as a set of direct strategic guidelines and already contains specific tactical instructions or recommendations’ (p. 142). Her most difficult task is to assess how this group cohesion can be maintained at the micro level. Not surprisingly, she makes use of Marc Sageman’s research into psycho-sociological characteristics and personal background of 150 active al-Qaida related terrorists. Crucially, however, she concludes that ‘there is no single or simple social re radicalisation pattern for members or cells of the transnational violent Islamist movement in the West and elsewhere’ (p. 148) still less that their ‘politico-ideological radicalisation and cell organization’ is necessarily a product of their ‘own poor social integration’. Rather, she concludes, the movement’s ‘extremist quasi-religious ideology and increasingly consolidated strategic discourse serve not only as its structural glue but also as an organizing principle’ (p. 150).

In conclusion, chapter six summarises the evidence and proposes ‘politicization as a tool of structural transformation’. This policy recommendation comes in two parts. Firstly, Stepanova suggests that a state that ‘wishes to effectively normalize and streamline the structural capabilities of violent movements that it cannot defeat militarily’ should ‘adjust its own organizational forms in response’ (p. 161). Such an adaptation might, she argues, ‘help to neutralize some of the comparative structural advantages of non-state actors in asymmetrical confrontation’ (p. 161). Thus the introduction of ‘some elements of network organizational design into relevant state security structures’ such as ‘more active inter-agency cooperation’ is the first type of policy recommendation. The second, Stepanova acknowledges, is controversial and consists of an effort to ‘normalize the structure of a violent movement’ by seeking to ‘formalize the informal links within the opponent’s organization’. Essentially, this consists of ‘stimulating the armed groups to become increasingly politicized and involved in non-militant activities’ (like Hamas) (p. 162). ‘These political wings’ Stepanova concludes, ‘could then gradually develop a stake in increasing their legitimization, and so develop into or join political parties and eventually be incorporated into the political process’ (p. 162).

Facilitators in the long-term transformation of asymmetrical conflicts between state and nonstate actors away from violence and towards political engagement are likely to appreciate Stepanova’s policy recommendations as far as they go. Inevitably, however, they might wish that Stepanova’s insightful book went further and included explicit recommendations to state agencies to recognize the negative impact of much indiscriminate violence carried out either

explicitly in their name (e.g. Guantanamo Bay) or implicitly on their behalf of proxies (e.g. extraordinary rendition). In the absence of clear admonition of state violence that becomes valuable propaganda in the hands of sophisticated non-state terrorist actors, it is likely that policy makers will be tempted to use Stepanova's valuable guide for very limited purposes – to enhance their understanding of an asymmetric threat and to limit their responses to structural, organizational changes only.

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